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WHERE DO YOU STAND ON COMMUNISM?

File Kennan

By George F. Kennan

("Where do you stand on communism?" This question was put recently to George F. Kennan, on the occasion of his nomination for the Board of Trustees of Princeton. The question came from a Princeton alumnus, and Mr. Kennan, who has served in the diplomatic service twenty-five years and is now at the Institute for Advanced Studies on leave from the State Department, recognized in the inquiry a matter of concern to many Americans. He answered his correspondent at some length, and his reply is printed here.)

Dear Sir:

The question you have asked me is, as I understand it: Where do I stand on communism?

I am glad you have asked this question, for it involves things that have a most important relation to the problems of our society at this time, and I should feel very badly if there were any misunderstanding of my position.

Your question is broadly stated, and I feel the need to outline my understanding of it before answering it.

My views on the issues of political philosophy that underlie the conflict between the Communist world and our own are publicly known, and I am sure that your question was not intended to imply that I might be an adherent of the Soviet ideology, or an admirer of Soviet policy. I gather from the enclosure to your letter that what you are interested in is rather my attitude toward American citizens who belong to the Communist party or who are, or appear to be, Communist sympathizers.

The problem of the influence exercised in this country by the leaders of the Soviet Communist party is one with which, as it happens, I have been thrown into rather intimate contact for a number of years. As an official of the Government stationed for long periods in the Soviet Union or adjacent countries and charged off and

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on for a period of nearly two decades with reporting on Soviet phenomena, the significance of this problem has been brought home to me on a multitude of occasions and in the most varied ways. Actually I believe that it fell to me to be the first, or one of the first, of our civil servants to bring formally to the attention of our Government the problem of the misuse of the privileges and facilities of American citizenship by the agents of Soviet power.

There was even before the recognition by our Government of the Soviet Government. In the Thirties I enjoyed, together with a small circle of associates in the Government service, the experience of being frequently labeled one of "the reactionaries in the State Department" and strongly criticized generally from the Left Wing for advocating a firm and realistic attitude toward the Soviet Government. Following my return in 1946 from my last period of service in Moscow, I shared with Jim Forrestal for some time the curious distinction of being the leading target for the Cominform propaganda machine among persons in this country. This particular form of attentiveness on the Communist side endured as long as I remained in Government service. Only as recently as last spring my presence in Brazil was the occasion for organized hostile demonstrations on the part of the Brazilian Communists on a scale which I imagine must have been almost unprecedented, and which included the smearing of hundreds of walls in the city of Rio with inscriptions reading "To death with Kennan" and even a number of burials in effigy.

In the light of these experiences I think you can understand that the problem you have raised is not one which has been absent from my thoughts or the importance of which I would be apt to underrate.

Now as far as our country is concerned this problem has, as it seems to me, three major aspects: (1) the Communist party itself; (2) the fellow-travelers and sympathizers; and (3) the rest of us.

With regard to the Communist party, I think that we would have a complete moral justification for outlawing it and stamping membership in it as an offense to the country;

country; but I doubt for several reasons that it would be wise or expedient to do so. Accordingly, I approve the general line of conduct we have followed toward the party over the course of these past three decades, namely: not to dignify it or enhance its outward importance or make martyrs out of its adherents by trying to outlaw and suppress it, but rather to keep it in the open where it can be seen and its activities observed, where its very freedom of action demonstrates how little afraid of it we are, and where its outward activities provide anyone who cares to see with ever-fresh and current demonstrations of its extremism, its remoteness from the feelings and ideals of our people, and the extent to which it is beholden to its cynical and contemptuous foreign masters.

One reason why I doubt the efficacy of any attempt to outlaw the party by legislation is that no legal formula can really be fully accurate and comprehensive for this purpose. The operating flexibility of the Communist movement is such that if membership in the party is made the criterion of legal action, it will simply be arranged that most dangerous Communists will not formally be members of the party. This phenomenon of American communism, being in part a state of mind and of subjective loyalty and touching for this reason on situations of fact which are highly unstable and difficult to elicit, is not a suitable one for treatment by legal norms; it is better handled--as it has been over these past three decades--by the basic common sense of our people and their natural resistance to violent and extreme political movements.

With regard to the fellow-travelers, you have a more complicated and difficult problem. I take these to be the people who would not think of joining the Communist party and who certainly do not consciously picture themselves as agents of Soviet power, but who feel sympathy for Soviet purposes as they see them, perceive no great conflict between those purposes and the purposes for which our own society was established and has lived, and are inclined to accept uncritically a substantial amount of the Soviet propaganda about our own country. That these people are a problem to us, I readily concede. That they are poor people to have in responsible and delicate governmental positions seems to me to be obvious, since they are apt to become

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subject to conflicts dangerous to the faithful and effective performance of their duties. I think it the business of our governmental leaders to see that they do not occupy such positions, and I know of no responsible Government administrators who have not tried faithfully, in recent years, to do just this.

But it does seem to me important that such matters should be arranged, if at all possible, quietly and tactfully and without unnecessary damage to the reputations and occupational possibilities of the persons concerned. People of this description are not criminals under the law. They have usually come by their beliefs honestly and out of a sincere preoccupation with the problems of our country. In many instances the attitudes which cause the trouble are passing phases, marking a given stage of intellectual and emotional growth. In such cases, what the people require is often a certain forbearance and firm intellectual resistance on the part of the rest of society--not public humiliation and ignominious rejection--in order to become constructive and useful citizens. Surely it is more important that they should become such citizens, enabled and encouraged to contribute again to the workings of our society, than that they should remain embittered outcasts.

In education, the presence of such people presents a more complicated problem than in government, because their elimination frequently brings up questions of the freedom of thought and inquiry infinitely greater in their importance than any individual situation of this sort. That persons really committed to the Soviet ideology have no place in our educational system seems to me to be obvious, for such persons cannot logically believe in the freedom of the mind or in the desirability of the quest for objective truth, and can therefore have no integral relation to the purposes of American education.

When you get into the realm of the sympathizers, however, you have a different problem. The worst you can formally charge these people with is poor judgment and muddy thinking. That is certainly a reason for

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not hiring them as educators in the first place, and I suppose there are certain categories of educational establishments in which it can properly and easily be a reason for letting them go, when they have once been hired. But there are other categories of establishments in which this last is more difficult to do without introducing ulterior questions and inviting serious misunderstandings. Here, it is always a question of circumstances; and I would know of no answer to such a question other than common sense and human wisdom applied to each individual case, coupled with a readiness to remember that the principles of academic freedom are absolutely basic to our American system, and that any inconvenience or danger brought on by the tolerance of an unhappy individual situation must always be weighed against the damage that may be done to those principles by too arbitrary and abrupt an approach in an individual case.

In general, precisely because things so vital to American ideals are here involved, I think we should be extremely careful to measure in each case the real extent of the danger and not risk prejudicing our principles for minor causes. It would be a serious situation indeed where we would have to conclude that sound teachings could not stand the competition of one or two challenging voices, however misguided we might think them to be. Our concern, after all, must be not to shelter our youth from destructive and ill-founded ideas but to arm it intellectually so that it will be capable of recognizing such ideas for what they are and playing its part in enabling our society generally to resist them. John Milton wrote: "He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true warfaring Christian." Surely this is an American sentiment; and we have no greater reason than Milton did to wish to see in our youth a "fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercized and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary ..."

The third category to be taken into account here is, as I say, the rest of us. It may surprise you that I include this category in such a discussion, but I

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assure you that if it is the dangers of communism we are talking about, we have no choice but to include it. Our society today is in the throes of a peculiarly painful and difficult adjustment to demands placed upon it by its own growth and by the development of world realities. It is idle to argue how many of these problems are of our own making, and how many have been made for us by others. We are like an individual moving into the responsibilities of maturity; he may feel that these responsibilities are unjustly placed upon him and are greater than he ought to be asked to bear, but it will do him no good to approach them in a spirit of self-pity and recrimination against others. On the contrary, he probably faces no greater danger than precisely that habit of thought. It is not by accident that so much of individual mental trouble begins with a tendency to exaggerate the malevolence of others and the extent of its revelance to one's own difficulties, as compared with the elements of one's own responsibility.

Our situation, as a national society, is analogous, but bears in it a special danger. It is a fact that palpable damage has been done to our national interest in the past by agents of, or sympathizers with, Communist power. We have only recently become aware of that fact. If there is nothing more difficult for the individual to assess and to keep in perspective than his own responsibility for his troubled predicaments, as opposed to the injuries that may have been done him by others, this is doubly true in the case of a national society. Because some damage has been done to us by misguided or malicious people in our own midst, because we are not sure that we yet know the full measure of this damage and because we find our present conditions of life exasperating, frustrating and alarming generally, there is a natural tendency among us to go the whole hog, to assume that all our troubles stem from this single source, and to conclude that we have only to eliminate it from our society and everything will be all right.

I cannot overemphasize to you the danger which I think lies in this aberration. It is not just the danger of getting things out of proportion--of exaggerating the damage done to us in the past by Communist penetration, of failing to realize the degree to which

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this problem has already been countered and liquidated, of seeing bogey men for the future. It is a question of something much more important--of our retention of the ability to meet effectively the many and heavy problems we have before us which have nothing to do with domestic communism at all, in which we would not be materially aided if every Communist party member and sympathizer were to be deported from our shores tomorrow, and for which we require the utmost restraint and realism in public action.

If our handling of the problem of Communist influence in our midst is not carefully moderated--if we permit it, that is, to become an emotional preoccupation and to blind us to the more important positive tasks before us--we can do a damage to our national purpose beyond comparison greater than anything that threatens us today from the Communist side. The American Communist party is today, by and large, an external danger. It represents a tiny minority in our country; it has no real contact with the feelings of the mass of our people; and its position as the agency of a hostile foreign power is clearly recognized by the overwhelming mass of our citizens.

But the subjective emotional stresses and temptations to which we are exposed in our attempt to deal with this domestic problem are not an external danger: they represent a danger within ourselves--a danger that something may occur in our own minds and souls which will make us no longer like the persons by whose efforts this republic was founded and held together, but rather like the representatives of that very power we are trying to combat: intolerant, secretive, suspicious, cruel, and terrified of internal dissension because we have lost our own belief in ourselves and in the power of our ideals. The worst thing that our Communists could do to us, and the thing we have most to fear from their activities, is that we should become like them.

That our country is beset with external dangers I readily concede. But these dangers, at their worst, are ones of physical destruction, of the disruption of our world security, of expense and inconvenience and sacrifice. These are serious, and sometimes terrible

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things, but they are all things that we can take and still remain Americans.

The internal danger is of a different order. America is not just territory and people. There is lots of territory elsewhere, and there are lots of people; but it does not add up to America. America is something in our minds and our habits of outlook which causes us to believe in certain things and to behave in certain ways, and by which, in its totality, we hold ourselves distinguished from others. If that once goes there will be no America to defend. And that can go too easily if we yield to the primitive human instinct to escape from our frustrations into the realms of mass emotion and hatred and to find scapegoats for our difficulties in individual fellow-citizens who are, or have at one time been, disoriented or confused. If we cannot resist these tendencies, then we would be better off to go to the other extreme and to put the Communist problem out of our minds entirely, dismissing it from our thoughts as even a contributory cause of our difficulties; for this would mean that we were incapable of dealing with such a problem in a balanced way, and of the two dangers, the lesser one would be to stop thinking about communism entirely.

But, personally, I feel that neither of these extremes is desirable or necessary; and I see no reason why we should not proceed on our course without either panic or complacency, recognizing our domestic Communists and their well-wishers for the genuine though limited problem that they are, but refusing to let this divert us from the greater problems we have before us or to lure us into reactions which threaten us with the loss of the national soul.